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Book Review: Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West

John H. Monnett

Metropolitan State College of Denver

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Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West. By Bobby Bridger. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xx + 480 pp. Notes, index. \$34.95.

Bobby Bridger has written a lively paced biography of Buffalo Bill Cody. Although the subtitle, *Inventing the Wild West*, promises much, Bridger's emphasis is strictly on interpretation of Cody's personality rather than a revision of the scout's significance to Great Plains history or the presentation of new material. This theme fits well into Bridger's avocation as an entertainer, producing and presenting *A Ballad of the West*, a trilogy of one-man shows depicting America's frontier period. The book covers Cody's early years through the Indian Wars, the days of his *Wild West* extravaganza, and his last years.

Unfortunately, Bridger relies on too few well-known sources to lay claim to much originality or serious scholarly synthesis. Cody's

autobiography, *The Life of Honorable William F. Cody* (1879, reprinted 1978), is used profusely throughout the book as is Don Russell's *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (1960). Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) is used far too much to lend documented credibility to Native American viewpoints. Most of the modern definitive secondary studies of the events Cody was involved with are missing, and consequently Bridger repeats many little historical errors from the early accounts he relies on that have long been questioned or proven otherwise. Roman Nose was not a Dog Soldier or a Southern Cheyenne chief. He was a member of the Suhtai clan, a Northern Cheyenne, and a Crooked Lance. He merely fought with the Dog Soldiers in their struggle for the Smoky Hill and Republican River country. Never was he a chief. Cody's highly disputed claim to killing Tall Bull at the Battle of Summit Springs is not considered in the light of all the conflicting claims. Most disappointing is a lack of documented consideration of Cody's changing image over the decades. Such evolving images of icons are essential to ascertaining significance through the years as culture and attitudes change with the times.

Despite these shortcomings Bridger has tried to present a side to Cody that is often ignored—his genuine affection for Native Americans (especially individual Native Americans he personally knew), a thesis that is presented with passion. Cody, the author points out, was not a bloodthirsty Indian killer but a man who, despite defending his own life in Indian fights, cared deeply about preserving indigenous culture and nostalgia for as long as possible in a non-patronizing manner, a personality trait often lost in his flamboyance and showmanship. Herein lies Bridger's contribution to the literature of this ubiquitous western figure. As a popular introduction to the life of William F. Cody, *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull* is well written with the popular reader in mind and highly recommended. Scholars seeking new insights and nuances into

Cody's personality and significance may be less satisfied.

JOHN H. MONNETT
Department of History
Metropolitan State College of Denver